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Editorial

Genevieve Warwick

The past year marked the centenary of Heinrich Wölfflin's widely-influential *Principles of Art History* (*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*), first published in 1915. Then, as now, this text is generally recognised as fundamental to the early development of the discipline.ⁱ At the time of its publication, the subject of art history was relatively new to the broad spectrum of university disciplines. In fact, Wölfflin's own career embodied this, for he succeeded to the chair of his former teacher, the great Renaissance historian, Jacob Burckhardt, at the University of Basel in 1897. Thus the Basel chair was transformed into a very early professorial appointment in art history, further establishing the academic credentials of this emerging subject.

The 'principles' that Wölfflin's book would enshrine are two-fold: that art history as a subject must fundamentally be one of visual analysis; and that the comparative method should be its primary means. Throughout, Wölfflin structured his arguments about the history of artistic style as a series of visual analyses of antinomies, proceeding through a sequence of side-by-side comparisons – Benedetto da Maiano's bust of Pietro Mellini beside Bernini's of Scipione Borghese; the austere façade of Palazzo Rucellai alongside the exuberant Palais Holnstein; Rembrandt's suggestive view of a Dutch interior next to the clarity of Vermeer – in order to draw out polarities of stylistic difference.

Just as significantly, the comparative method of visual analysis was also the cornerstone of Wölfflin's pedagogy. Indeed it may be argued that his lecturing method of

dual visual comparison, through both his teaching and his research, determined the intellectual cast of the discipline in its foundational era. As both an analytical and a teaching method in art history, Wölfflin's binary visual comparison was the child of the double slide projector. The first International Congress in the History of Art, which took place in Vienna in 1873, was already much concerned with technologies of image reproduction, including the slide and its new-found electric-light projection. But it was apparently Wölfflin who subsequently pioneered the use of *two* slide projectors as the tool of his analytical method.ⁱⁱ His dual-comparison technique would go on to structure the lecture practice of the discipline for over one hundred years, superseded only by the more flexible possibilities of digital technologies in the twenty-first century and the demise of the slide projector in the past decade.

As we ponder the consequences of technological change on art-historical practices and processes today, it is timely to consider the evolving historical roles that technology and process have played in a history of art-making and viewing, given current discipline-wide interests in the history of practice. Two special issues of *Art History* this year reflect on recent interests in artistic practice, from a range of chronologies and perspectives. The first, *Art and Technology in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Richard Taws and Genevieve Warwick, is concerned with the place of technology in the production and consumption of early modern art, mapping the shift from a craft-based understanding of technologies that characterised the early Renaissance, to the plethora of making and viewing devices for artistic production in the pre-photographic age. The second, *Material Imagination: Art in Europe, 1946-1972*, edited by Natalie Adamson and Steven Harris, poses questions about the material and conceptual transformation of artistic practice in Europe after 1945, to consider art and art history's position in 'thinking through materials'. Together these volumes extend and refine our

understanding of materials and materiality, technology and technique, as they pertain to current conceptualizations of artistic practice, and of the nature of 'art' itself.

The question of the 'material turn' that now preoccupies us across the discipline comes at precisely the historical moment in which the image, through the myriad simulacra of the internet, has become detached from its physical status as never before. If the photograph, and subsequently the slide projector, once initiated the conduct of our analyses by means of the image as a surrogate for the object, our picture libraries are now digitally-conceived and our visual knowledges electronically-assembled. For Wölfflin, clearly, the advent of photography and its subsequent projection enabled a new kind of visual analysis that was closely comparative, to be sure, but also for the first time estranged from the materiality of the art object itself. If he was closely attentive to questions of the visual relations of open and closed forms, of qualities of line, and of types of visual description across the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, drawing and print, Wölfflin did not probe matters of physical composition or medium pertaining to the objecthood of these arts *per se*. Instead, Wölfflin's formative influence in these foundational years of the discipline embraced the possibilities of the new photographic media of image reproduction, exploiting the analytical opportunities it afforded of close and comparative visual study of art's formalisms irrespective of its matter. Today, we continue to advance art-historical enquiry through the full gamut of new image technologies afforded by digital reproduction. Yet we are also much concerned with the material object, using advances in image technologies such as x-ray, infra-red, and optical imaging and spectrometry, to facilitate viewing practices well beyond the capacities of the eye alone. Thus, like Wölfflin's comparative method and the dual slide projector, our current preoccupation with the materialities of art surely rests on these new technological possibilities of viewing. Then as now, the technological means through which we view art,

both materially and immaterially, inform and define new epistemologies of art-historical thought.

ⁱ David Summers, "Heinrich Wölfflin's 'Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe', 1915", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 151, No. 1276, *Twentieth-Century Art and Politics* (July 2009), pp. 476-479.

ⁱⁱ Robert S. Nelson, 'The Slide Lecture, or The Work of Art *History* in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Critical Inquiry*, 26: 3, 2000, 414-434; Matthew Rampley, "The Idea of a Scientific Discipline: Rudolf von Eitelberger and the Emergence of Art History in Vienna, 1847–1873", *Art History* 34.1, 2011, 54-79.